

The Universal Prayer

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

19 April 2026

Children's Talk: What Do You Say to the Lord?

Any time we need to talk to the Lord or feel He is close, we can pray. But it is not always easy to know what to say when we pray. Sometimes we don't even know what we want or need; sometimes we kind of do but we just don't have the right words or feel awkward.

The Lord knows we won't always have the right words so He gave us a special prayer that we can always say no matter what.

In this manner, therefore, pray:
Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, as in heaven, so upon the earth;
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever;
Amen.
(Matthew 6:9-13)

You have heard that prayer before. You probably know it by heart. It is one of the first things that a Christian learns from the Lord's Word. We say it at home, at church, in many schools; and millions of other people say it every day, all over the world.

It's so useful to have this prayer to say when we don't know what else to do. When might you need to remember to say a prayer, for yourself or for someone else? There is something in the prayer for every situation we end up in:

- Our Father, who art in the heavens: We can sometimes forget that the Lord is with us. Talking to God as our father who is in the heavens can remind us that the Lord is always with us, and His angels are with us too. They love us and try to fill us with good thoughts and feelings.
- Give us this day our daily bread: we don't always get what we need. Maybe you felt very lonely but everyone seemed only to care about what they

wanted. Asking the Lord to give us our daily bread can remind us that He always is working to get us what we need.

- Deliver us from evil: sometimes life is very scary. Asking the Lord to rescue us from evil can remind us that He is always taking care of us.

Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, there can be something in it that is exactly what we need to hear or say.

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We do something together during our service virtually every Sunday, and we did it today too: We said the Lord's Prayer together. Millions of people around the world will say the words of this prayer today; and it is said by millions every day of the week. It's beautiful to think how connecting it is to share these exact words with so many people around the world. There's a reason this particular prayer is so universally recognized: it is the prayer Jesus Himself gave to His followers. In the Gospel of Matthew He spoke these short simple words as an alternative to the showy and longwinded prayers of the day (Matthew 6:5-9); and in the Gospel of Luke He gave another version of this prayer when His disciples simply wanted to know how to pray at all (Luke 11:1-2).

But the Lord's prayer is not just universal because it comes from the Lord Himself. It is also universal because in a spiritual sense it covers all aspects of spiritual life, heaven, and our relationship with the Lord. In the Teachings of the New Church, Swedenborg reports that when he would read the Lord's Prayer morning and evening, he could feel a pull towards the Lord and sense the influence of heaven pouring into his thoughts. From this experience he recounts that,

I was given to know that in the contents of this Prayer there are more things than all of heaven is capable of comprehending; and that with a person there are more things in it to the degree that his thought has been opened toward heaven. (*Secrets of Heaven* §6619)

For as short as it is, every part of the Lord's Prayer contains more significance than even heaven can comprehend. Yet we say it so often that we can recite it without even thinking of the most basic of meanings it holds. So today, we are going to go through each phrase of the prayer and reflect on what some of those deeper truths might be. Rather than trying to go into all the very many details the prayer contains,

this will be a more contemplative service, with a chance to reflect on the words we are so familiar with. The point is not so much to explain how it all fits together, but to give some ideas how each section might speak to you in any given section.

Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy name

In the original language, as in many translations of the prayer, the very first word is “Father.” The focus is on the Lord. Every prayer is directed towards God of course, but the terms we use for God each have their own nuance. “Father” brings to mind God as our parent, as the one who is above us, who looks over us from heaven, who protects us and keeps us safe, who provides all things. Nor is He just *my* father; He is *our* father; and so we all are brothers and sisters, no matter how far apart we may be otherwise. We are united in the Lord as our Father, our true Father. This is why the Lord told His disciples, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Matthew 23:9).

But God is not just a nameless entity; and so the phrase continues, “hallowed by Thy name;” or in modern English, “May Your name be kept holy.” A name is how we identify someone personally; it contains all the individual, personal qualities of that other person. The same is true of God: His “name” stands for all the qualities that make Him known to us. We know the name of our heavenly Father: it is the Lord, Jesus Christ. The Teachings of the New Church explain that this is God’s Divine Human (*Secrets of Heaven* §6887; *True Christian Religion* §113). What do you think of when you say His name? Who is the Lord to you? We shouldn’t approach God as a faceless entity who cannot be known, but as a person with whom we can have a relationship. We keep this name holy when we remember and honour all the qualities that make the Lord the Lord.

We address our prayer to the One who is the source of all that is good from heaven; and we know Him as the Lord, Jesus Christ: Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth

The second phrase brings things from heaven down to earth. This is something about which I think we can become cynical; we have some hope or dream of how good something could be, but then wistfully posit that it will only happen when we have transitioned into heaven. And there are indeed things of that nature. But we should not give up hope that life on earth can be like that of heaven. Some broken relationships can be repaired; some truly damaging habits can be broken; despair and anguish can give way to joy and gladness; we should not consign these all to mere wishful thinking, only truly possible when we are dead and gone.

How we bring heaven to earth is through the Lord's kingdom and His will. The coming of the Lord's kingdom and the doing of His will are closely related but distinct concepts. The Teachings of the New Church explain them in terms of truth and goodness. A kingdom represents truth (*Apocalypse Explained* §683): it is a system of government with rules and laws. When people technically obey these rules, the kingdom has to some extent come. But the Lord's will is that we can follow these rules in our hearts and souls. In other words, when we do what is right not because it is a rule, but because we love other people (*Apocalypse Explained* §683, 295). That change in heart might seem impossible here on earth; but it is a reality that we can experience here. What are some of the main ways you do the Lord's will on a regular basis? Does it feel more like a chore or like an opportunity to love?

We ask that the perfect love and wisdom that govern heaven can be made real here on earth too, both in external behaviour and in our hearts: Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, as in heaven so upon the earth.

Give us this day our daily bread

To get through our everyday work we need food. The same is true spiritually: we need sustenance from the Lord to be able to do the work of wisely loving our neighbours and growing spiritually. When we lack this spiritual nourishment we turn to look in all the wrong places:

When a man is spiritually dead the foods with which his soul is fed are delights from evils and pleasures from falsities—which are foods of death—and are also those which come from bodily, worldly, and natural things, which also have nothing of life in them. (*Secrets of Heaven* §680)

What feeds you and keeps you going? Is it spiritually alive or spiritually dead?

It feels like some days the Lord gives a good supply, others a very paltry one; But the *daily* bread from the Lord means that the Lord provides heavenly food “in every instant to eternity” (*Secrets of Heaven* §2838). When we go above and beyond to practice charity or when we are overjoyed at reaching a personal milestone, the Lord is providing goodness and truth; but when we fall short, fail, and are overcome with shame, or when we give in to temptation and are bitingly cruel to someone we love, the Lord also is providing goodness and truth. Whatever our day, or mental state, might be, the Lord is providing goodness and truth.

We ask the Lord to always make some amount of goodness and truth available to us, no matter how good or bad things are going in life: Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors

What do you owe the Lord? I was thinking of this and it really hit me that I'm so used to thinking of this phrase in terms of needing the Lord's forgiveness for having sinned that I don't really pay attention to what a debt actually is. But a debt is something that arises when someone has given or lent to you that you have not been able to pay back. Forgiveness is when they say it's alright, you don't have to pay that back after all, let's cancel the debt. With a monetary transaction this is very easy to keep track of: we can calculate the debt down to the exact amount owed. With spiritual things we cannot see debts so clearly and sometimes we forget just how much we have been freely given. It is perhaps of note though that this phrase immediately follows the one about daily bread: the Lord, at every instant, to eternity, is giving us good things! We are in His debt, no matter how well we behave or how rightly we think.

If we can remember that we have been given so much more than we can ever give back to the Lord, and yet still He forgives us, we can perhaps more easily forgive those who are in debt to us: the people who are in a net deficit as it were, for whom we have given more love than they seem to be able to return or who have hurt us in spite of our real efforts to treat them well. We don't need to see our relationships as transaction that needs to balance out; we can freely give, with no thought of receiving in return, simply because it is right and good and loving.

We ask the Lord to forgive us what we owe Him, that we can never pay back; and we commit to giving the same grace to those who are in debt to us: And forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

In my experience this is the part of the prayer that confuses people the most: the Lord tells us to ask Him to not lead us into temptation; but if we ask Him not to do something, doesn't that imply that He does or at least might do that thing? Does the Lord really ever lead us into temptation? The Teachings of the New Church indicate not, but that the prayer is written this way because at times it absolutely feels like He does:

Temptations and torments appear as if from the Divine, because, as before said, they come forth through the Lord's Divine presence; but still they are not from the Divine, or from the Lord, but from the evils and falsities which are in him who is being tempted or tormented. (*Secrets of Heaven* §4299)

When the Lord comes close and starts delivering us from evil, the evil fights back, causing temptation and pain; and since we feel that pain as soon as the Lord gets to work, it seems like the temptation or pain comes from the Lord Himself. It's like pulling a splinter out: I remember being a kid and having a splinter, and being so upset that my mom was going to pull it out; it felt like she was going to hurt me. Of course, it was the splinter that was hurting me, but since I could only sense the splinter in the process of my mom removing it, it seemed like the pain was coming from her. Spiritually speaking we have splinters embedded in our lives, and although they cause damage, as long as we leave them alone, we can be quite comfortable with them. It often feels like the best way to get rid of a temptation is to give in because it is only when we resist it that it gets painful. What spiritual splinters might you be sitting with 'comfortably'? We can only deal with the evil if we are willing to face the pain.

We ask the Lord not to lead us into hurt and pain; but we also ask Him to rescue us, knowing that in the process of healing there may well be hurt and pain: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever

There seems to be a progression or descent that flows through the prayer: it starts with the Lord, and heaven, then comes down to earth and daily blessings, our debts and falling short, and then evil itself that we must be saved from. But here at the very end it rises back up to the Lord again: the kingdom is His, all power is His, all glory is His, now and to eternity.

All things that we are grateful for, all things that we need, all the help that we are given, are from the Lord: For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever

Amen.

Lastly, *amen*. We use this word so often at the end of prayers that you could be forgiven for thinking that it means, “the end.” It is in fact a Hebrew word that means truly or assuredly, and is related to the word for faith and truth. It comes at the end of a prayer because it is a confirmation of all that goes before. Even if we cannot find that trust within ourselves at that exact moment, saying *amen* is a hope and a commitment to keep going to the Lord and doing our best. It is as if we are confirming that we trust in everything that we have just thanked the Lord for and that we trust that He can provide it.

Amen.

We will now have a musical interlude. The music playing will be the words of the Lord's Prayer set to music. The words will be on the screen if you would like to sing; but you are also more than welcome to simply quietly reflect. Today we have only scratched the surface of the infinite depth that lies hidden in these words; but every time we recite or hear them we have a chance to go deeper.